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JANUARY-JUNE



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# CONTENTS

## OF

# SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

VOLUME LVII

JANUARY-JUNE, 1915

	PAGE
ABRUZZI. <i>See</i> Earthquake in the Abruzzi, The.	
ALICE'S CHILD, . . . . . KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN	332
Illustrations by May Wilson Preston.	
ALLEN, WILLIS BOYD. <i>A Brother of the Angle</i> , . . . . .	549
AMERICA, EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY. <i>See</i> French Mem- ories of Eighteenth-Century America.	
ANDREWS, MARY R. S. <i>Coals of Fire</i> , . . . . .	53
ANTWERP, THE TAKING OF, . . . . . E. ALEXANDER POWELL.	92
Illustrations from photographs.	Author of "The Last Frontier," etc.
ARCHIBALD, JAMES F. J. { <i>The New Conditions in War—</i> <i>As Seen from the German</i> <i>Side</i> , . . . . .	347
<i>Fighting in the Carpathians—</i> <i>As Seen with the Austrian</i> <i>Army</i> , . . . . .	453
ARGONNE, IN, . . . . . EDITH WHARTON,	651
With a map	
ARTHUR ORTON'S CAREER, . . . . . GEORGE HIBBARD, . . . .	177
Illustration by Charles E. Chambers.	
AT THE CALL OF CHANCE, . . . . . EVELYN SCHUYLER	467
Illustrations by M. Leone Bracker, . . . . .	SCHAEFFER, . . . .
AUSTRIA AT WAR. <i>See</i> Carpathians, Fighting in the.	
BAILEY, TEMPLE. <i>Made in Germany</i> , . . . . .	711
BASEBALL—THE IDEAL COLLEGE GAME, . . . . LAWRENCE PERRY, . . . .	695
Illustrations from photographs, and from a drawing by H. Howland, reproduced in colors.	
BAYTOP, . . . . . ARMISTEAD C. GORDON, . . . .	561
Illustrations by Walter Biggs.	Author of "Maje," "Ommirandy," etc.
BELDEN, CHARLES J. <i>Motoring in the High Sierras</i> , . . . . .	201
BELGIANS. <i>See</i> King Albert of the Belgians.	
BISHOP, JOSEPH B. <i>Personality of Colonel Goethals</i> , . . . . .	129
BORDER-LAND, THE, . . . . . FRANCIS PARSONS, . . . .	304
Illustrations by W. Herbert Dunton.	
BOULGER, DEMETRIUS C. <i>King Albert of the Belgians</i> , . . . . .	294
BOUNTY-JUMPER, THE, . . . . . MARY SYNON, . . . .	235
Illustrations by Alonzo Kimball.	
BRANGWYN, FRANK. { <i>Eight Decorations for the East Court</i> <i>of the Panama-Pacific Exposition</i> , . . . . .	170
BREWSTER BLOOD, . . . . . KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN	77
Illustrations by May Wilson Preston.	
BROTHER OF THE ANGLE, A, . . . . . WILLIS BOYD ALLEN, . . . .	549
Illustrations by A. B. Frost.	

	PAGE
BROWN, KATHARINE HOLLAND. { <i>Brewster Blood</i> , . . . . .	77
{ <i>Alice's Child</i> , . . . . .	332
BULWARKS OF SOCIETY. Point of View, . . . . .	644
CANADIAN NATIONAL TRANSCONTINENTAL RAIL- WAY, THE NEW, . . . . . DUNCAN MACPHERSON, . . . . .	591
Illustrations from photographs.	
CARPATHIANS, FIGHTING IN THE—AS SEEN WITH THE AUSTRIAN ARMY, . . . . . JAMES F. J. ARCHIBALD, . . . . .	453
Illustrations from photographs by the Author.	
COALS OF FIRE, . . . . . MARY R. S. ANDREWS, . . . . .	53
Illustrations by Alonzo Kimball.	
CONSERVATION OF LIMITATIONS, THE. Point of View, . . . . .	255
CONSERVATION OF THE SPIRIT, THE. Point of View, . . . . .	256
DALLIN'S, MR., INDIAN SCULPTURES. Field of Art, . . . . . WILLIAM HOWE DOWNES, . . . . .	779
DAVIS, RICHARD HARDING. <i>Rheims During the Bom- bardment</i> , . . . . .	70
DEMING, P. <i>Growing Old</i> , . . . . .	372
DWIGHT, H. G. <i>Turkey and Germany</i> , . . . . .	368
EARTHQUAKE IN THE ABRUZZI, THE, . . . . . THOMAS NELSON PAGE, . . . . .	419
Illustrations from photographs by John P. S. Harrison.	American Ambassador to Italy.
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA. See French Memories of Eighteenth-Century America.	
ELLIOTT, SARAH BARNWELL. <i>The Last Flash</i> , . . . . .	693
ELMENDORF, DWIGHT L.— <i>Photographs of the National Parks—The Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley, Mount Rainier, and Yellowstone</i> , . . . . .	662
ESAU'S DAUGHTER—A STORY OF THE NORTH COUNTRY, . . . . . MARY SYNON, . . . . .	431
Illustrations by T. K. Hanna.	
EXPOSITION. See Panama-Pacific Exposition.	
FIELD OF ART, THE.	
Etching, Paris in (Frank Weitenkampf). Illustrated, . . . . .	259
Fragonard Masterpieces in the Morgan Collection, The (Ernest Peixotto). Illustrated, . . . . .	519
Hunt, William Morris, The Memorial Exhibition of the works of (Philip L. Hale). Illustrated, . . . . .	125
Indian Sculpture, Dallin's, Mr. (William Howe Downes). Illustrated, . . . . .	779
New Art in America, The (Birge Harrison, N.A.). . . . .	391
Zuloaga, Ignacio (Christian Brinton). Illustrated, . . . . .	647
FISHING. See Brother of the Angle, A.	
FRAGONARD MASTERPIECES IN THE MORGAN COLLECTION, THE. Field of Art, . . . . . ERNEST PEIXOTTO, . . . . .	519
FREEDOM OF EDITH, THE, . . . . . MARY GUÉRIN, . . . . .	760
Illustrations by Charles Sarka.	
FREELANDS, THE. Chapters I-XXVI. ( <i>To be continued</i> ), . . . . . JOHN GALSWORTHY, . . . . .	1, 153, 318, 499, 575, 735
FREESTON, CHARLES LINCOLN. <i>The Motor in Warfare</i> , . . . . .	185
FRENCH MEMORIES OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA, . . . . . CHARLES H. SHERRILL, . . . . .	
Illustrations from photographs, paintings, and engrav- ings.	
DANCING AND OTHER SOCIAL CUSTOMS, . . . . .	479
EDUCATION, COLLEGES, AND NEWSPAPERS, . . . . .	611
GALSWORTHY, JOHN. { <i>The Freeland</i> , . . . . . 1, 153, 318, 499, 575, 735	
{ <i>Ilthor : A Memory</i> , . . . . . 252	
{ <i>Sekhet : A Dream</i> , . . . . . 445	
GAMES. See Baseball.	
GARDEN, AN ACTUAL—GARDENS, IMAGINED. Point of View, . . . . .	775

GERMANY: See Militarism and Democracy in Germany; Turkey and Germany; War, The New Conditions in.	
GEROULD, KATHARINE F. { <i>Leda and the Swan</i> , . . . . .	224
{ <i>Martin's Hollow</i> , . . . . .	681
GOETHALS, GEORGE W. <i>The Building of the Panama Canal</i> , . . . . .	265, 395, 531, 720
GOETHALS. See Personality of Colonel Goethals.	
GORDON, ARMISTEAD C. { <i>The Shunway</i> , . . . . .	284
{ <i>Baytop</i> , . . . . .	561
GRAND CANYON. See National Parks, Photographs of the.	
GREAT BEYOND, THE. From a painting by . . . . . W. R. LEIGH, . . . . .	680
Reproduced in colors.	
GROWING OLD, . . . . . P. DEMING, . . . . .	372
	Author of "Adirondack Stories," etc.
GUÉRIN, MARY. <i>The Freedom of Edith</i> , . . . . .	760
GYPSY DANCER IN TOREADOR COSTUME, THE, . . . . . Facing page	523
From a painting by Zuloaga. Reproduced in colors.	
HARKER, L. ALLEN. <i>A Soldier's Button</i> , . . . . .	491
HATHOR: A MEMORY, . . . . . JOHN GALSWORTHY, . . . . .	252
Decoration by Sydney Joseph.	
HEALTH, THE GOSPEL OF. Point of View, . . . . .	124
HEARTH, THE. Point of View, . . . . .	121
HEREDITY, THE FREAKISHNESS OF. Point of View, . . . . .	518
HIBBARD, GEORGE. <i>Arthur Orton's Career</i> , . . . . .	177
HUNT, WILLIAM MORRIS, THE MEMORIAL EXHIBITION OF THE WORKS OF. Field of Art, . . . . .	125
	PHILIP L. HALE, . . . . .
INDIVIDUAL HOME, THE. Point of View, . . . . .	122
INDIVIDUAL OWNERSHIP, AS TO. Point of View, . . . . .	390
KING ALBERT OF THE BELGIANS, . . . . . DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER, . . . . .	294
With portraits of the royal family of Belgium.	Author of "The History of Belgium," etc.
KIPLING'S CHILDREN. Four drawings by . . . . . JESSIE WILLCOX SMITH, . . . . .	48
Reproduced in colors.	
LADY WHO COULDN'T GROW UP, THE—AND THE MAN WHO HAD NEVER BEEN YOUNG, . . . . . JULIET WILBOR TOMPKINS, . . . . .	105
Illustrations by W. M. Berger.	
LAST FLASH, THE, . . . . . SARAH BARNWELL ELLIOTT, . . . . .	693
Illustration by F. Graham Cootes.	
LEDA AND THE SWAN, . . . . . KATHARINE F. GEROULD, . . . . .	224
LEIGH, W. R. <i>The Great Beyond</i> , . . . . .	680
MACPHERSON, DUNCAN. <i>The New Canadian National Transcontinental Railway</i> , . . . . .	591
MADE IN GERMANY, . . . . . TEMPLE BAILEY, . . . . .	711
Illustrations by Kerr Eby.	
MARTIN'S HOLLOW, . . . . . KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD, . . . . .	681
Illustration by F. C. Yohn.	
MATTHEWS, BRANDER. <i>The Rise and Fall of Negro-Minstrelsy</i> , . . . . .	754
MCCLELLAN, GEORGE B. <i>The War from an American Point of View</i> , . . . . .	359
MEADOW BROOK, MEMORIES OF A. Point of View, . . . . .	517
MIDDLE AGE, . . . . . ALICE DUER MILLER, . . . . .	636
Illustration by Alonzo Kimball.	

	PAGE
MILITARISM AND DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY, . . .	OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD, 245
	Author of "Germany Embattled."
MILLER, ALICE DUER. <i>Middle Age</i> , . . . . .	636
MORGAN COLLECTION. See Fragonard Masterpieces in the Morgan Collection.	
MOTOR IN WAR AND PEACE, THE:	
MOTOR IN WARFARE, THE—POWER AND SPEED IN THE GREAT EUROPEAN CONFLICT, . . .	CHARLES LINCOLN FREESTON 185
Illustrations from photographs.	Author of "The High Roads of the Alps," etc.
MOTORING IN THE HIGH SIERRAS, . . . . .	CHARLES J. BELDEN, 201
Illustrations from photographs by the Author.	
WOMAN AT THE WHEEL, THE . . . . .	HERBERT LADD TOWLE, 214
Illustrations by S. Werner (one of them reproduced in colors), and from photographs.	
MOUNT RAINIER. See National Parks, Photographs of the.	
MOVIES, INSTEAD OF THE. Point of View, . . . . .	643
NATIONAL PARKS, PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE—THE GRAND CANYON, YOSEMITE VALLEY, MOUNT RAINIER, AND YELLOWSTONE, . . . . .	DWIGHT L. ELMENDORF, 662
NEGRO-MINSTRELSY, THE RISE AND FALL OF, . . .	BRANDER MATTHEWS, 754
Illustrated with facsimile reproductions of minstrel song-books.	
NEW ART IN AMERICA, THE. Field of Art, . . . .	BIRGE HARRISON, N. A., 391
OLD-TIME GAMES AND NEW. Point of View, . . . . .	389
ON THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION. (AN UNPUBLISHED ESSAY), . . . . .	ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, 66
With an introductory note by Lloyd Osbourne.	
PAGE, THOMAS NELSON. <i>The Earthquake in the Abruzzi</i> , . . . . .	419
PAL—THE STORY OF A DOG WHO RE-ENLISTED, . . . .	LLOYD DORSEY WILLIS, 376
Illustrations by Howard V. Brown.	
PANAMA CANAL, THE BUILDING OF THE, . . . . .	GEORGE W. GOETHALS, 265
Illustrations from paintings by W. B. Van Ingen, reproduced in colors, and from photographs.	U. S. A., Governor of the Panama Canal.
I. SUCCESS OF GOVERNMENT METHODS, . . . . .	265
II. LABOR PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE WORK, . . . . .	395
III. ORGANIZATION OF THE FORCE, . . . . .	531
IV. THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN ADMINISTRATION, . . . . .	720
PANAMA-PACIFIC EXPOSITION, EIGHT DECORATIONS FOR THE EAST COURT OF THE. From paintings by . . . . .	FRANK BRANGWYN, 170
Reproduced in colors.	
PARIS IN ETCHING. (Frank Weitenkampf.) Field of Art, . . . . .	259
PARIS, THE LOOK OF—AUGUST, 1914—FEBRUARY, 1915, . . . . .	EDITH WHARTON, 523
PARKS. See National Parks, Photographs of the.	
PARSONS, FRANCIS. <i>The Border-Land</i> , . . . . .	301
PERRY, LAWRENCE. <i>Baseball—The Ideal College Game</i> , . . . . .	695
PERSONALITY OF COLONEL GOETHALS, . . . . .	JOSEPH B. BISHOP, 129
Illustrations from photographs.	Former Secretary of the Isthmian Canal Commission.

POINT OF VIEW, THE.

Bulwarks of Society, 644.	Individual Home, The, 122.
Conservation of Limitations, The, 255.	Individual Ownership, As to, 390.
Conservation of the Spirit, The, 256.	Meadow Brook, Memories of a, 517.
Garden, An Actual, 777.	Movies, Instead of the, 643.
Gardens, Imagined, 775.	Old-Time Games and New, 389.
Health, The Gospel of, 121.	R. F. D., 645.
Hearth, The, 121.	Roofs, 258.
Heredity, The Freakishness of, 518.	Rubber Stamp Lies, 387.
	When Woman Wins, 516.

POWELL, E. ALEXANDER. <i>The Taking of Antwerp</i> , . . . . .	92
--	----

RAILWAY. *See* Canadian National Transcontinental Railway, The New.

R. F. D. Point of View, . . . . .	615
-----------------------------------	-----

RHEIMS DURING THE BOMBARDMENT, . . . . .	RICHARD HARDING DAVIS, 70
Illustrations from photographs.	

ROOFS. Point of View, . . . . .	258
---------------------------------	-----

RUBBER STAMP LIES. Point of View, . . . . .	387
---	-----

SCHAEFFER, EVELYN SCHUYLER. <i>At the Call of Chance</i> , . . . . .	167
--	-----

SEKHET: A DREAM, . . . . .	JOHN GALSWORTHY, . . . . . 115
Illustrations by Boardman Robinson.	

SHERILL, CHARLES H. <i>French Memories of Eighteenth-Century America</i> , . . . . .	479, 611
--	----------

SHUNWAY, THE, . . . . .	ARMISTEAD C. GORDON, . . . . . 284
Illustrations by Walter Biggs.	Author of "Maje," "Ommirandy," etc.

SIERRAS. *See* Motoring in the High Sierras.

SINEWS OF WAR, . . . . .	ANNIE ELIOT TRUMBULL, 621
Illustrations by W. T. Benda.	

SMITH, JESSIE WILLCOX. <i>Kipling's Children</i> , . . . . .	48
--	----

SOLDIER'S BUTTON, A, . . . . .	L. ALLEN HARKER, . . . . . 491
Illustrations by Reginald B. Birch.	

STEVENSON, ROBERT LOUIS. <i>On the Choice of a Profession. (An Unpublished Essay)</i> , . . . . .	66
---	----

SYNON, MARY. { <i>White Hyacinths</i> , . . . . . 115	
{ <i>The Bounty-Jumper</i> , . . . . . 235	
{ <i>Esau's Daughter</i> , . . . . . 431	

TOMPKINS, JULIET WILBOR. <i>The Lady Who Couldn't Grow Up—and the Man Who Had Never Been Young</i> , . . . . .	105
--	-----

TOWLE, HERBERT LADD. <i>The Woman at the Wheel</i> , . . . . .	214
--	-----

TRUMBULL, ANNIE ELIOT. <i>Sinews of War</i> , . . . . .	624
---	-----

TURKEY AND GERMANY, . . . . .	H. G. DWIGHT, . . . . . 368
-------------------------------	-----------------------------

VILLARD, OSWALD GARRISON. <i>Militarism and Democracy in Germany</i> , . . . . .	245
--	-----

WADDINGTON, MARY KING. <i>In War Times</i> , . . . . .	35
--	----

WAR, THE EUROPEAN:

FIGHTING IN THE CARPATHIANS, . . . . .	JAMES F. J. ARCHIBALD, . . . . . 453
IN ARGONNE, . . . . .	EDITH WHARTON, . . . . . 651
IN WAR TIMES, . . . . .	MARY KING WADDINGTON, . . . . . 35
KING ALBERT OF THE BELGIANS, . . . . .	DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER, . . . . . 294
LOOK OF PARIS, THE, . . . . .	EDITH WHARTON, . . . . . 523
MILITARISM AND DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY, . . . . .	OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD, . . . . . 245
MOTOR IN WARFARE, THE, . . . . .	CHARLES LINCOLN FREESTON . . . . . 185
NEW CONDITIONS IN WAR, THE—AS SEEN FROM THE GERMAN SIDE, . . . . .	JAMES F. J. ARCHIBALD, . . . . . 347
RHEIMS DURING THE BOMBARDMENT, . . . . .	RICHARD HARDING DAVIS, . . . . . 70
TAKING OF ANTWERP, THE, . . . . .	E. ALEXANDER POWELL, . . . . . 92
TURKEY AND GERMANY, . . . . .	H. G. DWIGHT, . . . . . 368
WAR FROM AN AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW, THE, . . . . .	GEORGE B. McCLELLAN, . . . . . 359

	PAGE
WAR AND THE ARTIST, . . . . .	RUFUS FAIRCHILD ZOGBAUM, 16
Illustrations from paintings.	
WAR FROM AN AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW, THE,	GEORGE B. McCLELLAN, 359
WAR, THE NEW CONDITIONS IN—AS SEEN FROM THE GERMAN SIDE, . . . . .	JAMES F. J. ARCHIBALD, 347
Illustrations from photographs by the Author.	
WAR TIMES, IN, . . . . .	MARY KING WADDINGTON, 35
WHARTON, EDITH, { <i>The Look of Paris—August, 1914—</i> <i>February, 1915;</i> . . . . .	523
<i>In Argonne,</i> . . . . .	651
WHEN WOMAN WINS. Point of View, . . . . .	516
WHITE HYACINTHS, . . . . .	MARY SYNON, 115
WILLIS, LLOYD DORSEY.— <i>Pal—The Story of a Dog Who</i> <i>Re-Enlisted,</i> . . . . .	376
WOMAN AT THE WHEEL, THE, . . . . .	HERBERT LADD TOWLE, 214
Illustrations by S. Werner (one of them reproduced in colors), and from photographs.	
YELLOWSTONE. See National Parks, Photographs of the.	
YOSEMITE. See National Parks, Photographs of the.	
ZOGBAUM, RUFUS FAIRCHILD. <i>War and the Artist,</i> . . . . .	16
ZULOAGA, IGNACIO. Field of Art, . . . . .	CHRISTIAN BRINTON, 647

## POETRY

	PAGE
BALBOA IN PANAMA—1513—SONNET, . . . . .	LLOYD MIFFLIN, 490
BALLADE OF THE LIRIS, A, . . . . .	EDMOND RICKETT, 452
BATTLESHIP REMARKS, THE, . . . . .	E. S. MARTIN, 169
BELGIUM, . . . . .	BENJ. PAUL BLOOD, 358
EMPTY ROOM, THE, . . . . .	HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD, 251
FUTURE, THE—(VOYAGEUR'S SONG), . . . . .	SAMUEL MCCOY, 642
HOME OF HORACE, THE, . . . . .	GEORGE MEASON WHICHER, 184
IMMORTALS IN EXILE, . . . . .	ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE, 386
LAIS TO HER DOG, . . . . .	EMMA A. OPPER, 574
LOVE CALLED ME NOT AWAY, . . . . .	SOLOMON SOLIS COHEN, 719
MADRIGAL, With illustration (frontispiece) by Elenore Plaisted Abbott.	EDITH IVES WOODWORTH, 691
MAGDALEN TO CHRIST, . . . . .	AMALIA JOSEPHINE BURR, 15
MISSING, . . . . .	EDWARD SHILLITO, 770
NEST, THE, . . . . .	FLORENCE EARLE COATES, 114
OFF MONOMOY, . . . . .	BLISS CARMAN, 661
OLD KING COLE, . . . . .	EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON, 622
PANAMA, Illustrations (including frontispiece) by N. C. Wyeth.	JOSEPH MILLS HANSON, 282
PEACE, . . . . .	DANIEL SARGENT, 254
SPRINGTIME PLAINS, THE, . . . . .	BADGER CLARK, 515
TECHNIQUE, THE OLD, . . . . .	MARGARET SHERWOOD, 317
"TELEFUNKEN." SONNET, . . . . .	JOHN FINLEY, 375
THIS WAR, . . . . .	OLIVE TILFORD DARGAN, 89
TOWERS OF MANHATTAN, THE, . . . . .	DON MARQUIS, 771
Illustration by Charles H. Cullen.	
TOY THEATRE, FOR THE DEDICATION OF A, . . . . .	BENJAMIN R. C. LOW, 444



# ON THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION

BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

THE original manuscript of this essay lay for years in a bundle of old papers, and was always assumed to be the "Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art." Recently, however, a closer examination revealed it to be a hitherto unpublished piece of work, and for a while I was greatly mystified as to its origin and the reason for its suppression. Its general character, the peculiar quality of the paper, even the handwriting itself—all went to show it was composed in Saranac in the winter of 1887-88. But why had it been suppressed?

Then in the dim, halting way things recur to one, I began to recall its history. It had been adjudged too cynical, too sombre, in tone, too out of keeping with the helpful philosophy always associated with R. L. S. Instead of assisting the Young Gentleman it was thought to be only too likely to discourage and depress him. Thus it was laid aside in favor of the other essay on the Career of Art. Whether we are right in publishing it now is for the public to decide. We seem to be going against the wishes of the author, who had evidently been content to leave it in oblivion; yet on the other hand it appears wrong to keep so fine an effort, and one so brilliant and grimly humorous from the many who would find pleasure in it. After all, there are others to be considered besides Young Gentlemen; and perhaps with these warned away we shall incur no reproach from the general lovers of literature, but on the contrary gain their support and commendation in the course we have taken.

LLOYD OSBOURNE.

YOU write to me, my dear sir, requesting advice at one of the most momentous epochs in a young man's life. You are about to choose a profession; and with a diffidence highly pleasing at your age, you would be glad, you say, of some guidance in the choice. There is nothing more becoming than for youth to seek counsel; nothing more becoming to age than to be able to give it; and in a civilisation, old and complicated like ours, where practical persons boast a kind of practical philosophy superior to all others, you would very naturally expect to find all such questions systematically answered. For the dicta of the Practical Philosophy, you come to me. What, you ask, are the principles usually followed by the wise in the like critical junctures? There, I confess, you pose me on the threshold. I have examined my own recollections; I have interrogated others; and with all the will in the world to serve you better, I fear I can only tell you that the wise, in these circumstances, act upon no principles whatever. This is disappointing to

you; it was painful to myself; but if I am to declare the truth as I see it, I must repeat that wisdom has nothing to do with the choice of a profession.

We all know what people say, and very foolish it usually is. The question is to get inside of these flourishes, and discover what it is they think and ought to say: to perform, in short, the Socratic Operation.—The more ready-made answers there are to any question, the more abstruse it becomes; for those of whom we make the enquiry have the less need of consideration before they reply. The world being more or less beset with Anxious Enquirers of the Socratic persuasion, it is the object of a Liberal Education to equip people with a proper number of these answers by way of passport; so they can pass swimmingly to and fro on their affairs without the trouble of thinking. How should a banker know his own mind? It takes him all his time to manage his bank. If you saw a company of pilgrims, walking as if for a wager, each with his teeth set; and if you happened to ask



them one after another: Whither they were going? and from each you were to receive the same answer: that positively they were all in such a hurry, they had never found leisure to enquire into the nature of their errand:—confess, my dear sir, you would be startled at the indifference they exhibited. Am I going too far, if I say that this is the condition of the large majority of our fellow men and almost all our fellow women?

I stop a banker.

"My good fellow," I say, "give me a moment."

"I have not a moment to spare," says he.

"Why?" I enquire.

"I must be banking," he replies. "I am so busily engaged in banking all day long that I have hardly leisure for my meals."

"And what," I continue my interrogatory, "is banking?"

"Sir," says he, "it is my business."

"Your business?" I repeat. "And what is a man's business?"

"Why," cries the banker, "a man's business is his duty." And with that he breaks away from me, and I see him skimming to his avocations.

But this is a sort of answer that provokes reflection. Is a man's business his duty? Or perhaps should not his duty be his business? If it is not my duty to conduct a bank (and I contend that it is not) is it the duty of my friend the banker? Who told him it was? Is it in the Bible? Is he sure that banks are a good thing? Might it not have been his duty to stand aside, and let some one else conduct the bank? Or perhaps ought he not to have been a ship-captain instead? All these perplexing queries may be summed up under one head: the grave problem which my friend offers to the world: Why is he a Banker?

Well, why is it? There is one principal reason, I conceive: that the man was trapped. Education, as practised, is a form of harnessing with the friendliest intentions. The fellow was hardly in trousers before they whipped him into school; hardly done with school before they smuggled him into an office; it is ten to one they have had him married into the bargain; and all this before he has had

time so much as to imagine that there may be any other practicable course. Drum, drum, drum; you must be in time for school; you must do your Cornelius Nepos; you must keep your hands clean; you must go to parties—a young man should make friends; and, finally—you must take this opening in a bank. He has been used to caper to this sort of piping from the first; and he joins the regiment of bank clerks for precisely the same reason as he used to go to the nursery at the stroke of eight. Then at last, rubbing his hands with a complacent smile, the parent lays his conjuring pipe aside. The trick is performed, ladies and gentlemen; the wild ass's colt is broken in; and now sits diligently scribing. Thus it is, that, out of men, we make bankers.

You have doubtless been present at the washing of sheep, which is a brisk, high-handed piece of manœuvring, in its way; but what is it, as a subject of contemplation, to the case of the poor young animal, Man, turned loose into this roaring world, herded by robustious guardians, taken with the panic before he has wit enough to apprehend its cause, and soon flying with all his heels in the van of the general stampede? It may be that in after years, he shall fall upon a train of reflection, and begin narrowly to scrutinize the reasons that decided his path and his continued mad activity in that direction. And perhaps he may be very well pleased at the retrospect, and see fifty things that might have been worse, for one that would have been better; and even supposing him to take the other cue, bitterly to deplore the circumstances in which he is placed and bitterly to reprobate the jockeying that got him into them, the fact is, it is too late to indulge such whims. It is too late, after the train has started, to debate the needfulness of this particular journey: the door is locked, the express goes tearing overland at sixty miles an hour; he had better betake himself to sleep or the daily paper, and discourage unavailing thought. He sees many pleasant places out of the window: cottages in a garden, angles by the riverside, balloons voyaging the sky; but as for him, he is booked for all his natural days, and must remain a banker to the end.

If the juggling only began with school-

time, if even the domineering friends and counsellors had made a choice of their own, there might still be some pretension to philosophy in the affair. But no. They too were trapped; they are but tame elephants unwittingly ensnaring others, and were themselves ensnared by tame elephants of an older domestication. We have all learned our tricks in captivity, to the spiriting of Mrs. Grundy and a system of rewards and punishments. The crack of the whip and the trough of fodder: the cut direct and an invitation to dinner: the gallows and the Shorter Catechism: a pat upon the head and a stinging lash on the reverse: these are the elements of education and the principles of the Practical Philosophy. Sir Thomas Browne, in the earlier part of the Seventeenth Century, had already apprehended the staggering fact that geography is a considerable part of orthodoxy; and that a man who, when born in London, makes a conscientious Protestant, would have made an equally conscientious Hindu if he had first seen daylight in Benares. This is but a small part, however important, of the things that are settled for us by our place of birth. An Englishman drinks beer and tastes his liquor in the throat; a Frenchman drinks wine and tastes it in the front of the mouth. Hence, a single beverage lasts the Frenchman all afternoon; and the Englishman cannot spend above a very short time in a café, but he must swallow half a bucket. The Englishman takes a cold tub every morning in his bedroom; the Frenchman has an occasional hot bath. The Englishman has an unlimited family and will die in harness; the Frenchman retires upon a competency with three children at the outside. So this imperative national tendency follows us through all the privacies of life, dictates our thoughts and attends us to the grave. We do nothing, we say nothing, we wear nothing, but it is stamped with the Queen's Arms. We are English down to our boots and into our digestions. There is not a dogma of all those by which we lead young men, but we get it ourselves, between sleep and waking, between death and life, in a complete abeyance of the reasoning part.

"But how, sir," (you will ask) "is there then no wisdom in the world? And when

my admirable father was this day urging me, with the most affecting expressions, to decide on an industrious, honest and lucrative employment—?" Enough, sir; I follow your thoughts, and will answer them to the utmost of my ability. Your father, for whom I entertain a singular esteem, is I am proud to believe a professing Christian: the Gospel, therefore, is or ought to be his rule of conduct. Now, I am of course ignorant of the terms employed by your father; but I quote here from a very urgent letter, written by another parent, who was a man of sense, integrity, great energy and a Christian persuasion, and who has perhaps set forth the common view with a certain innocent openness of his own:

"You are now come to that time of life," he writes to his son, "and have reason within yourself to consider the absolute necessity of making provision for the time when it will be asked Who is this man? Is he doing any good in the world? Has he the means of being 'One of us?' I beseech you," he goes on, rising in emotion, and appealing to his son by name, "I beseech you do not trifle with this till it actually comes upon you. Bethink yourself and bestir yourself as a man. This is the time—" and so forth. This gentleman has candor; he is perspicacious, and has to deal apparently with a perspicacious pick-logic of a son; and hence the startling perspicacity of the document. But, my dear sir, what a principle of life! To "do good in the world" is to be received into a society, apart from personal affection. I could name many forms of evil vastly more exhilarating whether in prospect or enjoyment. If I scraped money, believe me, it should be for some more cordial purpose. And then, scraping money? It seems to me as if he had forgotten the Gospel. This is a view of life not quite the same as the Christian, which the old gentleman professed and sincerely studied to practise. But upon this point, I dare dilate no further. Suffice it to say, that looking round me on the manifestations of this Christian society of ours, I have been often tempted to exclaim: What, then, is Antichrist?

A wisdom, at least, which professes one set of propositions and yet acts upon another, can be no very entire or rational ground of conduct. Doubtless, there is

much in this question of money; and for my part, I believe no young man ought to be at peace till he is self-supporting, and has an open, clear life of it on his own foundation. But here a consideration occurs to me of, as I must consider, startling originality. It is this: That there are two sides to this question as well as to so many others. Make more?—Aye, or spend less? There is no absolute call upon a man to make any specific income, unless, indeed, he has set his immortal soul on being “One of us.”

A thoroughly respectable income is as much as a man spends. A luxurious income, or true opulence, is something more than a man spends. Raise the income, lower the expenditure, and, my dear sir, surprising as it seems, we have the same result. But I hear you remind me, with pursed lips, of privations—of hardships. Alas! sir, there are privations upon either side; the banker has to sit all day in his bank, a serious privation; can you not conceive that the landscape painter, whom I take to be the meanest and most lost among contemporary men, truly and deliberately *prefers* the privations upon his side—to wear no gloves, to drink beer, to live on chops or even on potatoes, and lastly, not to be “One of us”—truly and deliberately prefers his privations to those of the banker? I can. Yes, sir, I repeat the words; I can. Believe me, there are Rivers in Bohemia!—but there is nothing so hard to get people to understand as this: That they *pay for their money*; and nothing so difficult to make them remember as this: That money, when they have it, is, for most of them at least, only a cheque to purchase pleasure with. How then if a man gets pleasure in following an art? He might gain more cheques by following another; but then, although there is a difference in cheques, the amount of pleasure is the same. He gets some of his directly; unlike the bank clerk, he is having his fortnight’s holiday, and doing what delights him, all the year.

All these patent truisms have a very strange air, when written down. But that, my dear sir, is no fault of mine or of the truisms. There they are. I beseech you do not trifle with them. Be-think yourself like a man. This is the time.

But, you say, all this is very well; it does not help me to a choice. Once more, sir, you have me; it does not. What shall I say? A choice, let us remember, is almost more of a negative than a positive. You embrace one thing; but you refuse a thousand. The most liberal profession imprisons many energies and starves many affections. If you are in a bank, you cannot be much upon the sea. You cannot be both a first-rate violinist and a first-rate painter: you must lose in the one art if you persist in following both. If you are sure of your preference, follow it. If not—nay, my dear sir, it is not for me or any man, to go beyond this point. God made you; not I. I cannot even make you over again. I have heard of a schoolmaster, whose speciality it was to elicit the bent of each pupil: poor schoolmaster, poor pupils! As for me, if you have nothing indigenous in your own heart, no living preference, no fine, human scorn, I leave you to the tide; it will sweep you somewhere. Have you but a grain of inclination, I will help you. If you wish to be a costermonger, be it, shame the devil; and I will stand the donkey. If you wish to be nothing, once more I leave you to the tide.

I regret profoundly, my dear young sir, not only for you, in whom I see such a lively promise of the future, but for the sake of your admirable and truly worthy father and your no less excellent mamma, that my remarks should seem no more conclusive. I can give myself this praise, that I have kept back nothing; but this, alas! is a subject on which there is little to put forward. It will probably not much matter what you decide upon doing; for most men seem to sink at length to the degree of stupor necessary for contentment in their different estates. Yes, sir, this is what I have observed. Most men are happy, and most men dishonest. Their mind sinks to the proper level; their honour easily accepts the custom of the trade. I wish you may find degeneration no more painful than your neighbours, soon sink into apathy, and be long spared in a state of respectable somnambulism, from the grave to which we haste.









